

REPORT No. 7.—Shirtmaking.

THE manufacture of shirts in the metropolitan district affords employment to not more than 150 hands, and cannot, therefore, be said to have attained an important position among the productive industries of the Colony. There are but four factories exclusively devoted to the business, and these are in a small way; besides the factories, the industry is carried on in some nine or ten retail soft-goods establishments, and by a few small contractors for the supply of slop-made stock shirts to retail shops. The factories confine themselves almost exclusively to the manufacture of white shirts of good quality, while other shirtmakers undertake, as well, Crimean and flannel shirts; but their output is not large, as these goods are usually made by persons working for the manufacturers of whitework and sundries, mentioned in a previous report.

ACCOMMODATION.

The comfort and convenience of the workers have in all cases been well provided for, and the sanitary arrangements in connection with establishments where this industry is carried on may fairly be classified as good. In one instance, however, a basement is used as a workroom, and though fairly suitable in other respects, the light and ventilation are defective.

DIVISION OF LABOUR.

Very few of the employees are qualified to put together a complete white linen shirt, though, for the most part, they acquire a knowledge of several portions of the work to be done, and do not, with the exception of machinists, confine themselves to any one particular branch. The various grades are apprentices, body and sleeve hands, collar, cuff, and front hands, button-holders, machinists, and cutters. In some establishments the only grades are apprentices, finishers, machinists, and cutters, the latter being, in most cases, either proprietor or manager of the business. Cutters and forewomen competent to take charge of a workroom are seldom to be found, and it is a general complaint among employers that competent workers in any branch are very scarce, the supply being by no means equal to the demand, and that apprentices are, as a rule, too independent, too careless, and too fond of change to learn the business quickly and thoroughly. On the other side it is urged that the remuneration to be obtained by shirtmakers is not such as to warrant any apprentice remaining at the trade longer than necessity compels.

HOURS OF LABOUR.

In the factories and shops inspected the hours of labour range from $42\frac{1}{2}$ to $45\frac{1}{2}$ per week, the general average of 44 hours obtaining in most cases. There is no overtime, except on rare occasions, when it is always paid for and tea is usually provided when the hands are detained beyond the recognised hour for closing. Among homeworkers the hours vary from 40 to 70, averaging a trifle over 59 hours of work per week.

WAGES.

The rates paid to different classes of workers vary considerably, not only under different employers but even in the same establishment. Apprentices in some cases complete their probation without pay, and receive in others 2s. or 2s. 6d. a week during the latter portion, and sometimes 5s. a week from the beginning. The range is great in other classes also, the wages commonly paid varying between the following figures:—

Grades.	Wages.			
	s.	d.	s.	d.
Apprentices	2	0	to	7 6 per week.
Body and sleeve hands ..	7	6	„	13 0 „
Collar and front hands	10	0	„	17 0 „
Button-holders	10	0	„	12 6 „
Machinists	7	6	„	21 0 „

Cutters and forewomen are sometimes paid £5 to £6 and £2 to £3 10s. per week respectively, but persons of these classes are comparatively scarce, and the work which would otherwise be entrusted to them is usually done by the proprietors. Excluding cutters and forewomen, the average wages of the employees in the shirt-making industry amount to 11s. 4d. per week, and excluding apprentices, to 14s. 6d. per week, or from 3d. to 4d. an hour.

Homeworkers employed in the manufacture of Crimean and woollen shirts and flannel vests, on piecework for whitework factories, average 11s. 6d. per week, or less than $2\frac{1}{2}$ d. per hour. The highest recorded weekly earning was 15s. for 60 hours, and the lowest 8s. for 40 hours.

GENERAL REMARKS.

During the colder months trade is generally slack, but for the rest of the year work is fairly constant. There is always some demand for locally made shirts and for shirts made to measure, in preference to imported stock shirts, but the latter are generally cheaper as well as superior in workmanship and appearance, so that although the local industry holds its ground, there seems little possibility of any expansion under present conditions. It is said, too, that there is not in the colony a single fully competent “shirt-dresser” capable of imparting to the newly finished articles an appearance similar to that presented by imported shirts, which are consequently preferred to the local stock product of even superior quality. Ordinary prices for locally made shirts range from 7s. 6d. to 10s. 6d. each, whilst imported shirts of similar quality range from 5s. to 8s. 6d. each, and usually present a much more highly finished appearance.